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of Tennyson a passage in which the vocabulary is more raw or more ugly.

That Tennyson was familiar with *King Lear* needs no proof. It is, however, interesting to notice that in his remarks upon Shakspeare in the *Memoir*, *King Lear* is the only play that is mentioned more than once; this fact and the nature of his remarks about the play would show that he was at least well acquainted with it.

He would say, "There are three repartees in Shakespeare which always bring tears to my eyes from their simplicity. One is in *King Lear* when Lear says to Cordelia, 'So young and so untender,' and Cordelia lovingly answers, 'So young, my lord, and true.'"

"*King Lear* cannot possibly be acted, it is too titanic. At the beginning of the play Lear, in his old age, has grown half mad, choleric and despotic, and therefore cannot brook Cordelia's silence. This play shows a state of society where men's passions are savage and uncurbed. No play like this anywhere—not even the *Agamemnon*—is so terrifically human."⁸

The last quotation shows that, whether he consciously reproduced it in *Pelleas and Ettarre* or not, Tennyson was at least aware of the elemental atmosphere of *King Lear* and of its portrayal of the beast in man.

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AN OLD AMERICAN COLLEGE PLAY

One of the rarest of early American plays is *The Mercenary Match*, written by Barnabas Bidwell.¹ Indeed Seilhamer, in his *History of the American Theatre*, 1889, referred to it as a lost drama; but now three copies are known to be in existence—one at Harvard, one in the Connecticut Historical Society Library at Hartford, and one in the Library of Congress. Because of its

⁸ *Memoir*, II, pages 290, 292.

¹ "The Mercenary Match, A Tragedy. By Barna. Bidwell. New-Haven: Printed by Meigs, Bowen & Dana, in Chapel-Street." The date, which does not appear on the title-page, is given as 1784 by Evans, and as 1785 by Wegelin.

rarity we have been compelled to rely for information mainly on Dunlap's curt statement: "And we have read the very pleasant and laugh-provoking tragedy of 'The Mercenary Match,' written by Barnaby Bidwell, Esq. This tragedy was, perhaps still is, in blank verse. The shouts of laughter produced by the reading of it in a company of young men some forty years ago, are vividly recollected."²

In view of the present-day interest in the early drama of this country, and in view, also, of the adjective acrimonious, sometimes applied to Dunlap, a more thorough analysis of this work may be justifiably offered.

First, who was Barnabas Bidwell? Son of the Reverend Adonijah Bidwell (Yale 1740), he was born at Tyringham (now Monterey), Massachusetts, in 1763. He graduated from Yale in 1785. In the fall of 1787 he was appointed tutor in Yale College, in which capacity he served for three years, gaining during his incumbency a considerable reputation as an elegant writer. Thereafter he entered the practice of law in Massachusetts. He soon became prominent in his profession and was elected to various important offices, including that of Congressional Representative and of Attorney General of the State. In 1810 Bidwell's accounts as County Treasurer—a position he had held for some twenty years—were examined, and he was found to have embezzled over \$10,000. This disclosure was especially inopportune, for at this very time President Madison was considering his elevation to the Supreme Court of the United States. Just before the trial for his offense Bidwell absconded to Canada, where he resided until his death in 1833. In his day he enjoyed a reputation as an orator of note, a profound jurist and a man of wide culture and courtly manners.³

The Mercenary Match was among Bidwell's youthful literary efforts; it was written and published during his Senior year, and had one stage appearance when it was acted by the author's college-

²William Dunlap, *A History of the American Theatre*, New York, 1832, p. 71. In addition to this reference there is a three-sentence synopsis of the play in P. L. Ford's *Some Notes towards an Essay on The Beginnings of American Dramatic Literature, 1606-1789*, New York, 1893.

³F. B. Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College with Annals of the College History*, Vol. iv, New York, 1907, pp. 387 ff.

mates.⁴ Whether it evoked laughter on this occasion seems to be unrecorded; whether it deserved laughter we shall shortly see.

The scarcity of the printed play will perhaps warrant the inclusion here of a fairly full sketch of the plot. The scene is laid in Boston; the time is apparently "the present."

Act I. The heroine has been forced by her father, in the face of her protests, into marriage with a Mr. Jenson because of his wealth. She admits to her maid that he is an excellent man, but she does not love him; hence her life is a tragedy. Mr. Jenson, entering, informs her that he is about to be sent on a two-year diplomatic mission to France, and offers his wife the option of going or remaining. She decides to consult her former lover, Major Shapely.

Act II. Shapely is seen to be a selfish schemer, who is resolved to gain Mrs. Jenson for himself. His dupe and catspaw is Lyndall, a wealthy, aspiring simpleton, who covets Jenson's diplomatic appointment. The major advises Lyndall to place a spy in Jenson's house in order to discover some secret that may be used for his undoing, and consents to act in that capacity himself. At Mrs. Jenson's request Shapely goes to her house to offer his advice, and while he is there Jenson, on Lyndall's recommendation, agrees to take him into his household as steward.

Act III. Informed by Jenson that his wife is an unmanageable shrew, Shapely suggests crossing her in order to tame her proud spirit. Specifically he proposes that she be deprived of certain jewels. The remainder of the act is devoted to the Major's seductive practices against Lyndall's purse.

Act IV. Mrs. Jenson complains to Shapely of her husband's harsh treatment. He hints that her jewels are being given to another woman. In a soliloquy she utters the wish that she might be Shapely's bride, and swears to avenge herself with the death

⁴Dunlap, p. 71; Dexter, p. 389. The circumstances under which the play was presented do not yield to investigation. Bidwell was a member of Brothers in Unity, one of the old Yale debating societies, and the performance may have been given by this organization. The minutes show that a "dialogue" called *The Modern Mistake*, written by Bidwell, was given by the Society April 3, 1784, but there is no mention of *The Mercenary Match*. That the two titles do not refer to the same play is clearly indicated by a comparison of the *dramatis personae* of the printed play with the cast of the "dialogue" as entered in the minutes.

of her mate in case he is proved guilty of infidelity. Jenson enters and demands his miniature, saying "somebody may esteem it more." Thus convinced of his faithlessness, she vows his death.

Act V. All plans having been made, Shapely, accompanied by two seamen, enters Jenson's chamber and stabs him. The maid soon comes upon the corpse and shrieks out the discovery. Neighbors and officers rush in and seize the murderer. Mrs. Jenson dies of the shock. Shapely, thwarted in an attempt to commit suicide, assures the seamen that their death is imminent from a poisoned drink he administered just before the deed to prevent their telling tales. The play ends with the villain's pronouncement of his own damnation to "everlasting woe."

That the plot contains

faults of almost every name,
That candour can forgive, or censure blame

is admitted in the epilogue with engaging frankness and a considerable degree of truth. The parts of the tale are badly articulated, the catastrophe coming more or less independently of what precedes. A greater defect is the lack of motivation; decisions are reached and deeds done for reasons that could not possibly prompt them in anything but a badly constructed play. The author loses all the dramatic interest and probability that may reside in his intrigue by failing to create in his heroine an ardent passion for her accomplice. Moreover the characterization is negligible, all the *dramatis personae* being the merest conventions, with one exception: Lyndall, the ambitious coward, shows traces of skill in portraiture. Under the magic of Shapely's large promises he grows confident and boastful, but in solitude his assurance rapidly oozes away until he again becomes the spineless poltroon.

Further, as might be expected in a play by a college boy, *The Mercenary Match* leans heavily on those dramas with which a student would most likely be acquainted—Shakespeare's in particular. The phraseology is frequently suggestive of Shakespeare, and the trick of ending each act with couplets was no doubt caught from him. In situation, too, the indebtedness is clear. *The Taming of the Shrew* must have furnished the idea of crossing Mrs. Jenson in Act III. The murder and the means of its discovery are in the *Macbeth* manner. The spirit in which Jenson

meets death, and Mr. Worthy's eulogy over his body derive from *Julius Cæsar*.

As for the basic situation, the assassination of a man by his wife and her lover, it was probably suggested to Bidwell by the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus. In the structure of the drama, also, a Greek influence is noticeable. The unities of place and action, and probably the unity of time, are observed. The murder occurs off-stage and is later narrated by one of the participants, who thus performs the office of the Greek messenger.

Still another possible plot source is the domestic tragedy *Arden of Feversham* as adapted by George Lillo from the anonymous Elizabethan version and produced in 1759. Here again, as in the American play, occur the murder plot of wife and lover, the "Et tu, Brute," and other more or less parallel *motifs*.

But in spite of grave shortcomings, which are not surprising in the work of a novice of twenty-one, and which, withal, are not more flagrant than those of the average American play of its period, *The Mercenary Match* is not wholly insignificant as a piece of pioneer dramatic literature. There is one scene which has a certain mild impressiveness: While the assassins are in the fatal chamber, Mrs. Jenson, waiting without, suffers the agony of terrified suspense, and half relents in her evil design; but Shapely soon reappears with the bloody dagger. His narrative of the deed is not without dignity and effectiveness as he remorsefully exclaims:

He look'd so tenderly at me,
His anguish fixt a dagger in my soul.

Stylistically the drama, like other early American school plays, is rhetorical and declamatory. One purpose of all such compositions was to display the oratorical skill of the participants; hence long, artificial speeches are certain to appear. But at least Bidwell's blank verse is smooth and easy, and if he is capable of such unpoetic lines as

But, as the social partner of my life,
I can't approve of him.

or

Which dost thou choose, to honour *Gallia's* court;
Or let *Bostonians* share thy company?

he is also capable of rising distinctly above this humble level. To the truth of this statement let the following quotations testify:

Mrs. J. Relentless sire,
 What had I done, to forfeit thy regard?
 How couldst thou trifle with thy daughter's life,
 And bid me wed despair? (Act I.)

J. Now breathing spring, with milder gales succeeds,—
 Dissolves the hoary frost,—spreads o'er the fields
 A curious carpet (wrought in nature's loom)
 Of chearing green, diversify'd with flowers;
 And bids the year unfold her stores to man.
 Now night, which wraps one half the earth in gloom,
 Has roll'd her shadows over to the west.
 Alternate day pursuing night around,
 Comes laughing from the east, array'd in light,
 Invites the flocks to play, the birds to sing,
 And drowsy mortals to arise from sleep.
 Now pleasure greets the soul through every sense.
 Enjoy my fair the beauties of the *spring*,
 And all the fragrance of the lovely *morn*. (Act I.)

Mrs. J. I take my mournful leave of thee, O world;
 Thy beauty's faded; thy delights are cold!
 Farewell, farewell, thou empty, flattering world!
 Begone, with all thy fair, inviting scenes!
 Farewell, contented thoughts, and quiet rest!
 And did not fear forbid the tragic deed,
 I'd bid a long, a last adieu to life. (Act IV.)

Shap. The period soon will come, to bless our eyes,
 Fly, lingering moments, swiftly urge your flight,
 To bear away the intervening time;
 Then drop your wings, descend, and walk with us.
 What scenes of dalliance open to our view!
 Love makes a paradise on earth.

(*he sings*)

Mrs. J. A pretty song! You have a lovely voice;
 A charming voice you have; It pleases me.

Shap. And me no less, because it pleases you.

Mrs. J. How sweet is music to the mourning soul!

Shap. As sweet as honey and as pure as light.
 When through the portals of the listening ear,
 Soft music enters and salutes the soul,
 It soon dispels the frowning cloud of care,
 Bids faded melancholy yield a smile,
 And sorrow wipe away the starting tear.

Mrs. J. I love to hear your voice.
 Have you no other song? (Act V.)

Mrs. J. Yet nature sinks—Death pulls me down a main—
Oh! Oh! I leap the eternal precipice. (Act v.)

The play is empty, it is inflated, its sentiments are hackneyed; yet there is revealed in it a feeling for felicitous poetic phrase and in general for literary effect hardly to be met with elsewhere in American drama of the eighteenth century. Its only rival in this direction is Dunlap's *Leicester* (written 1790), which parallels it somewhat closely in broad outline and occasionally in diction. This fact may explain the later writer's contempt for Bidwell, though the similarity between the two pieces probably arises merely from identity of models.

As a final observation it may be pointed out that *The Mercenary Match* belongs to the category of the bourgeois tragedy of domestic life, a type which flourished in Europe in the eighteenth century, Lillo being the chief representative in England, Lessing in Germany, and Diderot in France. In this country Bidwell's play was the first specimen of the genre to appear. The author was perhaps conscious of this affinity when he wrote in the prologue:

The characters which he unfolds to view
Are not sublime although he thinks them true.

But shows the miseries of a man and wife,
A simple circumstance of modern life.

The Mercenary Match, then, has at least two claims to the serious consideration of the student of American drama. In the first place it is one of the extremely few eighteenth century plays with any claim, however slight, to poetic merit; and secondly it is our first example of an important dramatic form that had already gained wide currency in Europe.

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